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Johnson brings message to the Hoosier State

Libertarian presidential candidate campaigned at IUPUI Thursday.

By Rob Burgess
Tribune night editor

INDIANAPOLIS — Republican Mitt Romney and Democrat Barack Obama spent Thursday attempting to fire up their respective supporters following Wednesday's televised debate performances in Denver. Meanwhile, former two-term New Mexico governor and current Libertarian presidential candidate Gary Johnson took his case to the Hoosier State.

"Ohio is really active and so is Indiana," he said in an exclusive telephone interview Friday. "There are great organizations in both states. It's a great fit."

As the presidential campaign enters its final weeks, Johnson and his running mate, retired California Superior Court Judge Jim Gray, are in the process of visiting a combined 40 colleges and universities. As a part of this tour, Johnson gave a speech and conducted a question-and-answer session from 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday at the Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis' lecture hall.

Johnson said it was "disheartening" to watch Obama and Romney argue Wednesday night over "who's going to spend more money on Medicare."

"We absolutely have to cut Medicare spending significantly or we're going to find ourselves in a monetary collapse," he said. "Kids are screwed. I'm going to retire. I'm going to have health care, but you're not going to have health care because this is a Ponzi scheme that's just not going to work out. And then you're never going to be able to retire because you're going to have to pay this all back. ... We've got choices between two candidates who want to hold Medicare intact, something that is absolutely unsustainable."

Johnson wasn't allowed to join Wednesday's debate, but it wasn't for lack of trying. Last month, Johnson filed an anti-trust lawsuit in federal court in an attempt to force the Commission on Presidential Debates to allow any candidate who has their name on enough ballots to win 270 electoral votes into the debates. The current CPD requirements stipulate a candidate needs at least 15 percent support in five national polls to be included. Johnson said he believed were he to be included in the debates, his popularity in the polls would "triple."

"Just stating the obvious: The [Commission on Presidential Debates is] made up of Republicans and Democrats," he said. "They're not a governmental agency. They're Republicans and Democrats. They have no interest whatsoever in seeing a third voice on the stage. None."

Johnson announced his intention to seek the Republican nomination for president in April 2011. In December 2011, he announced his intention to campaign instead as a Libertarian. Johnson said it wasn't so much that he changed his opinions. He said it was the circumstances around him which

shifted.

"I believe...the majority of Republicans really are in this same philosophical mindset, but when it comes to Republican activists and those that control the national party, something that I never witnessed in the state of New Mexico, really I was excluded from the process unfairly," he said. "I wasn't marginalized. I was excluded. They shut the door. And it was flagrant." Johnson said he never encountered such opposition until he entered the national political stage.

"In New Mexico, I was allowed to go make my pitch," he said. "I don't think I've changed my message at all, Libertarian or Republican it's still the same message. ... I made a name for myself pinching pennies. I made a name for myself vetoing legislation. The whole notion of less government and government shouldn't be in the bedroom."

Besides supporting gay marriage, Johnson also differs from many members of his former party when it comes to military intervention. Johnson said government's role was to attack other countries only when provoked.

"Libertarians don't want to intervene militarily," he said. "Hey, if we're attacked, we're going to attack back, but military intervention has resulted in hundreds of millions of enemies to this country that but for our country's military intervention wouldn't exist. You know these drone attacks, we're hitting the target with the drones, but we're also killing a lot of innocent people, a lot of innocent people. And so, if that's your friend, if that's your family member, if that's your associate. You're going to vow revenge against

the country that did that even if that includes losing your own life. And that's the problem."

And unlike either Obama or Romney, Johnson supports legalization of marijuana.

Johnson himself smoked marijuana for medicinal purposes from 2005 to 2008 after a debilitating paragliding accident. Next month, voters in Colorado, Oregon and Washington will decide whether or not to legalize what is currently classified as a Schedule I drug in their states.

"I think we are absolutely at a tipping point right now," he said. "I think Colorado is going to vote to legalize marijuana. ... I think Coloradans get this. And right now, you have 50 percent of Americans supporting legalizing marijuana. The trend-line is more and more people are recognizing this. And the reason more and more people are recognizing this is that it's getting talked about in unprecedented conversation."

Johnson said other candidates were too afraid of voter backlash to take on marijuana legalization.

"It's all about getting elected," he said. "It's all about getting reelected as opposed to: aren't we supposed to be electing leaders that are actually going to take on the issues? That's been my experience in politics. I made a promise that I was going to take on the issues. I hope that an example of that is taking on the drug war, if you will. There's nothing to be gained politically from doing that other than it's such a gigantic issue that everybody puts their head in the sand over."

With each election cycle setting new records for campaign spending, third party candidates like Johnson face more challenges than ever in transmitting their messages. Monetarily, the 2012 presidential election cycle has been unlike any other in the nation's history. In January 2010, the Supreme Court of the United States handed down a decision in the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* case.

The 5-4 decision freed corporations and labor unions to spend unlimited amounts in federal elections anonymously.

"I don't believe in limiting campaign contributions, but what I do believe in is 100 percent transparency," Johnson said. "Transparency does not exist today. And it hasn't existed. And that's really the reform that campaign finance needs. I have said tongue-in-cheek many times that politicians ought to wear jackets similar to NASCAR drivers with the sponsorship prominently displayed on the jackets: the bigger the emblem, the bigger the donation."

No stranger to tests of sheer will and endurance, Johnson is an avid skier and bicyclist and has reached the highest peaks on four of the seven continents, including Mount Everest. So if he doesn't win the presidency next month, is this mountain of presidential politics something he might climb once more?

"What I'm witnessing is there is just a lot of enthusiasm," he said. "I think it's the fastest growing segment of American politics today and yes, I would stay involved if I continue to be relevant and if I continue to be a relevant

voice and I'll just rely on my past experience that I'm pretty good at judging whether or not that's the case."

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